

NCA
VOC FOR ~~10P/PN~~
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5749
JOHN ROBERTS/WEST AFRICAN BUREAU

APRIL 21, 1978

ECOWAS SUMMIT

ANNCR:

ECOWAS -- THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES -- THE COMMON MARKET OF THAT REGION -- IS NOW THREE YEARS OLD HERE WITH A BACKGROUND REPORT ON THAT ORGANIZATION'S SUMMIT MEETING IS VOA'S WEST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT, JOHN ROBERTS.

VOICE:

THE ECOWAS SUMMIT NOW UNDERWAY IN LAGOS IN MARKS A TURNING POINT. FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS THE ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN CONCERNED WITH THE TASK OF GETTING ITSELF ORGANIZED. NOW IT IS READY TO BEGIN WORK. AND THAT WILL CONSIST OF REDUCING AND ELIMINATING TRADE BARRIERS AMONG ITS MEMBERS, HARMONIZING TARIFFS AND CUSTOMS AND PROMOTING ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS.

A FIFTY MILLION DOLLAR FUND HAS BEEN SET UP TO COMPENSATE MEMBERS FOR LOSSES IN REVENUE RESULTING FROM LOWERED TARIFFS AND CUSTOMS AND TO FUEL DEVELOPMENT. THIRTY MILLION DOLLARS WAS SET ASIDE FOR ESTABLISHING A SECRETARIAT IN LAGOS AND A HEADQUARTERS FOR THE FUND IN LOMATOGO.

THE ROAD THUS FAR HAS NOT BEEN EASY. THE GREATEST DIFFICULTY WAS TO OVERCOME THE RELUCTANCE OF THE FRENCH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES EVEN TO TAKE PART IN THE VENTURE. THEY HAD FELT THE LINGUISTIC, CULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES WERE TOO GREAT, AND WITH THEIR STRONG LINKS TO FRANCE AND AMONG EACH OTHER, THEY PREFERRED TO GROUP TOGETHER IN THEIR OWN SMALLER FRANCOPHONE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY.

BUT TOGO PRESIDENT GNASSINGBE EYADEMA TOOK THE LEAD IN CONVINCING THE OTHER FRENCH -SPEAKING COUNTRIES THAT THEY SHOULD

TAKE PART. THE OTHER PRIME MOVER WAS NIGERIA, THE WEALTHIEST AND MOST POPULOUS COUNTRY IN AFRICA. THERE WERE FEARS THAT NIGERIA WOULD DOMINATE THE ORGANIZATION, AND IT'S A TRIBUTE TO THE DIPLOMATIC SKILLS OF ITS LEADERS THAT THESE FEARS WERE OVERCOME AND THAT THE TREATY WAS SIGNED.

THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING THE SECRETARIAT AND STAFF RECRUITED AND ESTABLISHED IN LAGOS AND IN LOME (PHONETIC). THERE HAS BEEN GRUMBLING BY SOME MEMBERS ABOUT EXCESSIVE SALARIES AND LAVISH QUARTERS FOR THE PRINCIPAL OFFICERS AND THERE HAS BEEN SOME CONTENTION ABOUT FAIR STAFF REPRESENTATION FOR ALL SIXTEEN MEMBERS.

CONSIDERING THE OBSTACLES, IT'S PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING THAT PROGRESS MUST BE SLOW AND STEADY. THE STATISTICS OF ECOWAS ARE THEMSELVES REVEALING: SIXTEEN COUNTRIES REPRESENTING ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY MILLION PEOPLE AND AN AREA OF SIX MILLION SQUARE KILOMETERS. NINE COUNTRIES SPEAKING FRENCH, FIVE SPEAKING ENGLISH AND TWO PORTUGUESE. VAST DIFFERENCES IN WEALTH AND STATE OF DEVELOPMENT, AND WIDELY VARYING POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS AND ECONOMIC SYSTEMS.

MANY OBSERVERS BELIEVE ITS REMARKABLE THAT ECOWAS GOT OFF THE GROUND AT ALL AND ITS MEMBERS ARE THEMSELVES DEEPLY AWARE OF THE PITFALLS THAT REMAIN. THEY ARE VERY MUCH AWARE, FOR INSTANCE, OF THE DISAPPOINTING BREAKUP OF THE EAST AFRICA ECONOMIC COMMUNITY WHICH HAD LINKED KENYA, TANZANIA AND UGANDA, THREE COUNTRIES WITH A COMMON LANGUAGE AND COLONIAL BACKGROUND. BUT THE MERE FACT THAT ECOWAS HAS SO MANY MEMBERS CREATES A NETWORK OF INTERLOCKING INTERESTS WHICH MAY SERVE TO BIND THE ORGANIZATION TOGETHER MORE FIRMLY. THE ORGANIZATION'S GREATEST LIABILITY -- SIZE AND DIVERSITY -- MAY IN THE LONG RUN BE ITS GREATEST ASSET.

WJL/PY